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AUTHOR Pavitt, Charles
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ABSTRACT

A study assessed whether means for student evaluations of instruction tended to be lower in research methods classes than in other communication classes. Questionnaires were sent to 126 communication departments listed in the 1993 Speech Communication Association Directory and which were thought likely to require undergraduate research methods courses. A total of 77 questionnaires were completed, for a response rate of 61%. Results indicated that (1) student evaluations of communication research methods courses were lower than those for other communication classes; (2) courses receiving relatively low evaluations were more likely to be larger, intended for less experienced students, and geared more toward methods rather than statistics compared to classes rated as relatively high or average; (3) the number of elective courses offered per year was lower than the number of required courses; and (4) the mean class size for elective courses was 21.43 while the mean for required courses was 53.92. Findings suggest that if a communication department requiring a research methods course wants to counteract biases in student evaluations, it should keep class size to less than 40 and intend the class for juniors and seniors. (RS)

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ED 372 450

Charles Pavitt

Student Evaluations of Communication Research Methods Courses: Relative Levels and Contributing Factors

More than a thousand papers have been published concerning the strengths and weaknesses of student evaluations of instruction at the university and college level (see Costin, Greenough, & Menges, 1971; and Marsh, 1984, for important literature reviews). Although commentators make generally positive assessments of student evaluations, research has revealed several biases that can affect the validity of summary indices for questions employing numerical scales. Evaluation item means can be affected by factors such as student motivation, class size, and course content. In universities in which summary indices are an integral part of the evaluation of instruction, these biases can adversely affect an instructor's apparent performance level and, in turn, their concrete rewards for performance, such as merit pay, promotion, and tenure.

As established in Frey and Botan's (1988) survey, many communication departments have included classes in research methods as requirements in their undergraduate programs. Communication research methods classes may be particularly susceptible to bias in summary indices of student evaluations. Courses involving mathematics characteristically receive lower evaluations than humanities and social science courses, and the inclusion of a mathematics-based class in a communication program may result in lower student motivation and relatively low student evaluations when compared to other courses in the same department.

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The primary purpose of the present study is to assess whether means for student evaluations of instruction tend to be lower in research methods classes than in other communication classes. The indication of such a tendency may aid universities in the interpretation of these data and in insuring the equitable distribution of concrete rewards for skillful instruction. A secondary purpose of the study is to determine whether a set of factors consisting of course level, content coverage, class size, the number of sections offered, and the presence of teaching assistants are associated with relative evaluations of communication research methods courses.

Methods

A questionnaire, developed by the author with the aid of other faculty for the purposes just described, was sent to 126 communication departments listed in the 1993 SCA Directory that the author identified as likely to require undergraduate research methods courses. The sample included, among others, all departments noted in recent reviews (Edwards, Watson, & Barker, 1988; Trost, Barker, and Barker, 1988) as having highly regarded doctoral or master's programs, and all departments at state university main campuses.

Results

Overview

We received 77 responses to our mailing, a return rate of 61.1%. Of these 77, 49 (63.6%) required research methods for at least some of their undergraduates, 9 (11.7%) offered research methods as an elective (11.7%), and 19 (24.7%) did not offer the

course.

Required

Of the 49 responding departments that required research methods for some or all undergraduates, two (4.1%) reported that student evaluations for the class were very high, five (10.2%) reported eveluations to be above average, 12 (24.5%) reported evaluations to be average, 18 (36.7%) reported evaluations to be below average, and six (12.2%) reported evaluations to be very low, relative to other communication courses. Two (4.1%) reported that evaluations were dependent on the instructor, and four (8.2%) did not answer this question. These data suggest that student evaluations of research methods courses are lower than those for other communication classes.

Three of the factors included in the study (course level, class size, and content coverage) were found to be associated with relative level of evaluations. The results for these factors are best described by dividing the responses into two categories; one including classes evaluated above or equal to the average communication course (n = 19), and the other including classes evaluated below average (n = 24). For course level, only one class evaluated above or equal to average was designed for first and second year students (5.3%), whereas eight classes evaluated below average were similarly intended (33.3%). For class size, the mean enrollment for classes evaluated above or equal to average was 35.32, while the mean for classes evaluated below average was 68.65. For content coverage, classes evaluated above or equal to average spent mean proportions of 35.47% of the time on statistics

and 51.84% of the time on research methods (such as experiments, surveys, and content analysis), with the analogous proportions for classes evaluated below average at 26.10% and 57.64%. Thus, communication research methods courses receiving relatively low evaluations were more likely to be larger, intended for less experienced students, and geared more toward methods rather than statistics, when compared with classes rated as relatively high or average.

The other two factors explored in the study were not associated with relative level of student evaluations. Programs whose methods courses were evaluated above or equal to average offered a mean of 2.68 sections per year, as compared to 2.85 for programs whose methods courses were evaluated as below average. Although classes rated as below average had a greater mean number of teaching assistants (1.25 versus .58), this difference is an artifact of class size; the 26 classes with no TAs averaged 33.17 students, the nine classes with one TA averaged 54.56 students, and the eight classes with more than one TA averaged 110.63 students. A three way contingency table showed that the presence or absence of TAs had no effect on relative course evaluations dependent on whether the class has more or less than 40 students.

Elective

Of the nine respondents who indicated that their program offers research methods as an elective, 3 (33.3%) reported that student evaluations were above average, 4 (44.4%) reported evaluations to be below average, and 2 (22.2%) did not answer the question. Given these small numbers, meaningful comparisons

between these categories are not possible.

A comparison between the required and elective data sets reveal some interesting findings. The overall proportion of time spent on statistics (26.07%) and research methods (48.93%) in elective courses was similar to the overall proportions in required classes (30.24% and 55.08% respectively). There were, however, striking differences between the two samples in the mean number of sections offered per year (elective, 1.07; required, 2.78) and the mean class sizes (elective, 21.43; required, 53.92).

Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with past research on biases in student eveluations. Mathematics-based courses are generally evaluated lower than social science and humanities courses (Marsh, 1984). Class size is known to have a negative impact on evaluations (Costin, Greenough, & Menges, 1971). The finding that classes with a greater proportion of time spent on statistics, rather than methods, may be consistent with past findings that course difficulty is actually positively related with evaluations (Marsh, 1980). The effect for course level also makes sense if we can assume that upper-class students are more motivated to take a communication research methods class than lower-class students. Unfortunately, the sample of respondents whose programs offer research methods as an elective was too small to allow for meaningful analyses. Based on past research, the expectation would be for those classes to be evaluated more positively than required classes (Marsh, 1980).

These results suggest that if a communication department

requiring a research methods course wants to counteract biases in student evaluations of these courses, it should keep class sizes at less than 40, and intend the class for juniors and seniors. If the needs of the program make these recommendations impossible, than the department should expect student evaluations in these courses to be below average, should include these factors in their criteria when evaluating the instructor's performance, and should attempt to educate other members of the university community involved in the evaluation of communication faculty to strongly consider these factors in their judgments.

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